



Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

THE ROUND TABLE

MORE USES OF THE CONFERENCE

In venturing to add an afterword to the suggestive discussion of the "Use of the Conference Hour," in the *English Journal* of March, 1915, I am but aiming to suggest some further implications of the writer's fundamental statement: "Indeed, the whole business of the conference period is controlled by the idea of the individuality of the student." If, then, the individuality of the student is the controlling factor of the conference, its primary aim must be the discovery of that individuality. At the very outset it is our attitude that is vital—or fatal. We must come to the conference, not, as we too often come to the classroom, intent solely on instruction, but rather alert for discovery. For we must explore before we can impart; and we must try to understand before we can hope to correct. If, as the writer continues, the object of the conference is "to lead the student to overcome certain compositional errors which are peculiar to his expression," then its success lies in leading the student to disclose the habits of mind that underlie these errors of expression.

So stated, the principle seems an obvious one; yet how often does our zeal for correction, the habit of the blue pencil, tempt us to forget it. But without this discovering attitude, the best-laid plan, the soundest pedagogical theory, may often prove worse than useless. Take for example one excellent suggestion, the necessity of finding a prevailing fault instead of merely enumerating minor and miscellaneous errors. Such a diagnosis, however useful, is not always infallible. Here is a theme bearing all the marks of that "carelessness" that covers such a multitude of sins grammatical and rhetorical. The student, giggling nervously, accepts your verdict—and then lets drop the hint that leads to the story of overstrained days and sleepless nights. Or here is a paper irritating with its irrelevant detail. "Lack of proportion," you glibly label. But your easy dogmatism is met by a vehement protest. You pause baffled—to notice at last the twisting fingers and set chin, and to discover beneath lack of proportion the deeper lack of poise and of humor.

This, of course, is not to decry the value of the diagnosis that precedes the conference, if with it goes an alertness for discovery that may modify or remold the first judgment. Moreover, the exploring attitude that may save us from false or incomplete criticism, may as often keep us from spoiling the effect of our truest criticism. To begin a conference with, "Your story has no point," may nullify all your efforts at the start by

creating reserve, discouragement, opposition. But to elicit from the student an explanation of his purpose, an opinion of the result, seldom fails to draw from him the very criticism that he would probably have resented from you. And criticism can be really effective only when it leads to self-criticism.

The discoverer-teacher, then, cannot rest content with pigeon-holing these prevailing errors, subtle or salient. He must ever seek the mental habits beneath the faults of form. He sees the loose sentence as evidence of loose thinking; he diagnoses the "comma fault," the "*so* habit," as symptoms of disconnected, half-developed ideas. He encourages the student to substitute a *when* or *because* for the *and* and *so*, to recast the disjointed thought-stuff into the close-knit unity of form that clarifies thought; for he knows that this concrete effect is worth many an abstract discussion of the loose sentence.

Above all the discoverer-teacher will be alert to detect the empty introduction, the wordy conclusion, the monotonous sentence-structure behind which lurks the deadly "what's-the-use?" It is this indifference, hidden or aggressive, that is the test of the teacher. Here is revealed the real need of these reluctant writers—a motive equal to the difficulty, yes, the *drudgery*—of self-expression and self-correction. And no ready-made stimulus will serve here, however pedagogically guaranteed. The teacher may convince the would-be stenographer of the uses of the colon; he may hold before the future business man the bane of the business letter; but he may not transfer to another the motive that must spring from the individual. He must beware, too, of exalting mere correctness as a goal. Was there ever a normal human being who wanted to be correct? But is there one of us who does not sometimes want to be heard, to be understood? And if the student can relate his themes to his vague desire for self-expression, he may come to value correctness as a step in the pathway to power.

The value of the conference then, alike to student and to teacher, will depend on the ability of the teacher to become the discoverer, the learner. Indeed, it is in the conference that the methods and results of the classroom are tested. Yesterday you were quite satisfied, even a bit elated; the class had surely grasped that idea! Now a blank look, an "I thought I understood, *but*—" reveals the rift in your too easy success. But there is the rarer compensation—the answering gleam of imagination that you strove, so vainly it seemed, to kindle. For this is the fruit of the conference, that momentary interchange of sympathies, that meeting of personalities that is the teacher's opportunity and exceeding great reward.

FRANCES WENTWORTH CUTLER